

Report from the Curriculum Review Task Force, Revised 3/23

A large portion of our faculty have been involved for the past two years in the time-consuming task of reviewing and reforming the university's curriculum. During that time we have considered the curriculum as it is and as it might be, from every angle imaginable. We have collected and pored over dozens of pages of data and have written dozens more pages in response. We have met in countless committee meetings and have spent hundreds of hours in conversation and subsequent reflection. We have debated one another at length, in department meetings, in committee meetings, and in plenary listening sessions.

In this, the curriculum review process was driven by at least three imperatives, highlighted by the Provost:

- **The need to deliver the curriculum primarily with full-time faculty.**

This challenge appeared especially serious for the Humanities program, which has significant staffing needs. It must offer 60 sections each semester without the benefit of having contingent hires.

- **The need to provide a more humane workload for the faculty.**

Continued pressure to do more with less – sustained over many years now -- has left many faculty members feeling stretched at best, exhausted and demoralized at worst.

- **The need to continue to provide students with a high quality Liberal Arts education, consistent with our values and mission.**

No one argued that we address our resource challenges by compromising our mission. We could, however, undertake a constructive review of our curriculum to see if we could find ways of making the curriculum and faculty workload more sustainable while protecting, or even enhancing, our mission. In other words, we sought ways to make a virtue of a necessity.

Though this round of curricular reform was instigated by concern for the curriculum's sustainability in light of dramatic cutbacks in adjunct faculty, faculty workload is only one of several factors that have shaped the proposal. Foremost among these factors are a respect for student choice, a recognition of the needs of a diverse student body, and a desire to preserve our school's strengths and distinctiveness as a public liberal arts university.

The result of this work is a draft of a proposal for curricular change, distributed to the faculty last December. This draft is the most recent of several, the first few were created (early in Spring 2012) by faculty on two different subgroups of the original task force. Subsequent conversations involving members of the full task force led to the formation of a summer working group charged with drafting (in Summer 2012) a consensus document based on the original proposals. This document was later refined further, informed by conversations taking place at several plenary meetings of the task force held in Fall 2012. Several members of the task force then produced a draft similar to the current one which was voted on at a meeting of the task force near

the end of Fall 2012 and discussed at a pair of faculty listening sessions held early in Spring 2013.

The purposes of the present document are threefold. We begin by providing a narrative which “tells the story” of the proposal: why has the proposal taken the shape that it has? That is, what principles have guided us in our work of curricular reform, and what outcomes do we hope to achieve? What, as one colleague asked in a recent listening session, is our *telos*?

This document’s second purpose is to examine our distinctiveness: what is it that we do at UNC Asheville that sets us apart from other institutions, particularly from our sister schools in the UNC system? We recognize several ways in which we stand apart from other schools. We highlight our commitment to interdisciplinarity, manifest not only in the curriculum itself (e.g., in the Humanities Program, ILS Topical Clusters) but also in opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarship and engaged learning projects. We highlight our commitment to the liberal arts, manifested in part in small classes that encourage critical thought and communication skills and that foster meaningful interaction between faculty and students. We highlight our commitment to serving the public of North Carolina by providing an affordable course of study that is accessible to all students, including nontraditional students, first-generation students, and transfer students.

The third and last purpose of this document is to lay out the individual pieces of the proposal so that they may be examined individually and in concert with one another, in light of the narrative that precedes them. We hope this examination will demonstrate that the curriculum we propose will help UNC Asheville retain its distinctiveness while providing our students with an educational experience that is both intellectually challenging and intentionally interdisciplinary while providing more flexibility for them. Moreover, we hope to show that the curriculum gives faculty numerous opportunities to perform scholarly and creative work that is engaging and interdisciplinary without making overly burdensome demands on their time or energy.

A narrative for curricular reform

In Spring 2011 Provost Jane Fernandes and Volker Frank, then the Chair of Faculty Senate, convened a meeting of over sixty faculty who had answered the call for assistance in reviewing and reforming UNC Asheville’s curriculum. This call for reform was initially driven by the considerable cutbacks to adjunct positions, cutbacks which were forced by a challenging economic climate and which threatened to impose a burdensome workload on the school’s full-time faculty. The question was put to the faculty: how might the university’s curriculum look if it were made to be one which its faculty could effectively deliver while still emphasizing interdisciplinarity and meaningful student engagement?

Though the task force’s immediate concern was sustainability, early consideration of a broad variety of data on students’ behaviors and attitudes, on faculty perception of the current curriculum, and on curricula at cognate institutions helped task force members plot a course. Much of the early work of the Curriculum Review Task Force (CRTF) was done in subcommittees: the Big Picture Subgroup, the Curricular Sustainability Subgroup, the Research and Evaluation Subgroup, and the National Trends Subgroup. These bodies met frequently in the spring and summer of 2011, and their first conversations shaped the course of the curricular

reform for the next year and a half. Several realizations had a particularly profound impact on the task force's future ideas and recommendations:

1. **Student choice is of paramount importance.** It was noted early in the process that our current curriculum is a very prescriptive one: several major concentrations require more than 60 credit hours to complete and a student may end up taking nearly as many credits in order to satisfy her ILS requirements. It was agreed early on that though we should offer students some guidance, they should be granted freedom to explore. Specifically, students should be able to take elective courses which are required for neither major nor ILS and that general education requirements should be designed to be met through a variety of courses. On average, UNC Asheville students have 18.5% of the credits for free electives (transfer students have even fewer free electives, 14.4%, on average). The lack of student autonomy and agency in their educational choices is antithetical to our liberal arts mission. If indeed we wish to afford our students a greater degree of freedom in their design of their curriculum, the CRTF agreed that we should guarantee a minimum of at least 20 credit hours of free electives for every student, and that the combination of general education and major requirements should be capped at 100 credit hours.
2. **Transfer students play a major role at UNC Asheville.** Enrollment and graduation data from the past several years show that a considerable percentage of UNC Asheville's graduates (often a majority, in fact) begin their studies elsewhere. Many of the faculty on the task force were unaware of these data and were surprised to learn about them. The implications are profound. For instance, they demonstrate that under our current curriculum, there are very few courses (*e.g.*, HUM 324) which all students are required to complete, exploding the myth of the "common experience" offered by our Humanities sequence. Also, though some faculty may wish to design a liberal arts curriculum tailor-made for traditional 4-year students who come to us straight from high school, doing so would not take into account the difficulties such a curriculum poses to our substantial body of transfer students. Therefore from the very beginning of the process, the needs of transfer students shaped conversations about curricular reform.
3. **The curriculum is not the only measure of the university's mission.** Although the curriculum, as a collection of course requirements, majors, and concentrations, offers the most explicit and tangible evidence of our school's commitment to the liberal arts, this commitment manifests in many other ways. Small classes give students opportunity to build close relationships with their instructors while encouraging critical discussions and opportunities for students to improve their ability to communicate their ideas whether orally or in writing. Perhaps more important are the often-immeasurable relationships developed between students and faculty in their work in and outside of the classroom. Such relationships lead to opportunities for undergraduate research, engaged scholarship and service learning projects that often bridge the barriers between academic disciplines.

Together these realizations give rise to what we might call a "narrative" that shaped many of the conversations on curricular reform that have taken place over the past two years:

An ideal curriculum would strike a balance between freedom and prescription, offering an intentionally interdisciplinary course of study that serves both traditional students and transfer students and does not make unreasonable demands on faculty time and energy.

The realization that a college is more than its curriculum encouraged task force members to avoid conflating our curriculum with our liberal arts mission, a mindset that encouraged us to think about the ways in which UNC Asheville distinguishes itself as a liberal arts university. It is to such distinctiveness that we now briefly turn.

UNC Asheville's Distinctiveness

As mentioned in the previous section, we highlight our commitment to interdisciplinarity apparent both in the curriculum itself (e.g., in the Humanities Program, ILS Topical Clusters) and in opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarship and engaged learning projects. We highlight our commitment to the liberal arts, manifested in part in small classes that encourage critical thought and communication skills and that foster meaningful interaction between faculty and students. We highlight our commitment to serving the public of North Carolina by providing an affordable course of study that is accessible to all students, including nontraditional students, first-generation students, and transfer students.

UNC Asheville's distinctiveness does not lie in one part of the curriculum nor exclusively in the curriculum at all but with the combination of factors -- none of which alone is distinctive to UNC Asheville but together make it uniquely attractive. UNC Asheville is

- an affordable, public liberal arts university;
- dedicated to high-quality undergraduate teaching and learning;
- offering small class sizes;
- where both teachers and students take an active role in the educational process;
- with strong roots in the Humanities ;
- and a focus on Undergraduate Research;
- in the stimulating natural and cultural environment of Asheville

However, while these are favorable aspects of UNC Asheville, the CRTF also recognized a number of characteristics that distinguish UNC Asheville less favorably. Research generated by the curricular sustainability and national trends subcommittee revealed several problematic features of UNC Asheville's curriculum: it is viewed as large, prescriptive, and administratively burdensome. In addition, parts of ILS have lost the confidence of faculty and students.

Moreover, the CRTF has concluded that the general education requirements and major requirements at UNC Asheville are collectively large, complex, and unsustainable. The

committee found that, on average, students spend a larger portion of their studies (35.1%) completing their general education requirements than they spend fulfilling their major requirements (33.8%). With the combination of a large general education requirement and many large majors, it is possible for students to have few or even no free electives on the way to meeting the 120 credit hour requirement for graduation.

Not only is the general education curriculum large and complex, it is administratively burdensome, particularly the cluster and intensive requirements. For example,

- Administration and assessment of the intensives and clusters involves at least 39 faculty members on seven committees, plus 17 cluster coordinators.
- Over the last five years, on average, 56.9 quantitative intensives, 96.1 information intensives, 45.6 diversity intensives, and 110.4 writing intensives have been offered each semester.

Over that same time, between 201 and 286 courses have been offered each year as part of a cluster. While these courses evidence the success in integrating ILS courses into the majors, all of these courses require an application process, periodic reapplication, and assessment, all of which require substantial faculty time.

In addition, evidence suggests that at least some parts of the general education curriculum have lost the confidence of a significant portion of students and faculty alike:

- A survey conducted by CRTF in Spring 2011 found that among those responding, more than 60% stated that clusters “should either probably or definitely not be required”, whereas only about 27% stated that clusters “should either probably or definitely be required.” Transfer students – more than 50% of our newly accepted students are transfer students – are particularly alienated by the general education requirements.
- The 2009 faculty perceptions survey of ILS is equally troubling. Of the 20 pages of comments, 14 focus on the weaknesses of the program, 6 on the strengths.
- Both the health and wellness requirement and LSIC 379 are viewed as unnecessary by students.

Proposal specifics

This section addresses specific items of the CRTF proposal, beginning with a measure meant to address the issue raised at the end of the last section.

A 100-credit-hour limit on majors and general education combined:

The CRTF recommends that a combination of major and general education requirements may not exceed 100 credit hours, and further that no more than 45 required hours in any major may come from a single prefix. Courses which satisfy both major requirements and general education requirements are not counted twice in this 100-hour total; this overlap will allow departments and programs to more easily meet the 100-hour limit. This is in contrast to our current catalog statement, “A major field of concentration normally consists of not more than 36 semester hours with a maximum of 24 semester hours of cognate courses, exclusive of any departmental requirements that also satisfy Integrative Liberal Studies requirements” (p. 49), a standard which some departments are currently not meeting.

This requirement is recommended in order to guarantee that all students, regardless of major, have an opportunity to complete at least 20 credit hours of absolutely free electives en route to an on-time graduation. The requirement offers a compromise between the status quo and a requirement in an earlier proposal, one which called for a “hard cap” on the number of credit hours a major concentration could require (namely 60).

Exemptions to the above restrictions will be granted to BFA programs and to joint degree programs.

Health and Wellness Promotion requirement:

The CRTF recommends that we no longer require students to complete a course chosen from HWP 152-155 for general education purposes. In the Spring 2011 survey of graduates, among all ILS requirements, only clusters were viewed as less necessary. In addition, while UNC Asheville has had a HW or HWP requirement for decades, in recent years, as the Department of Health and Wellness has developed a strong and growing degree program in Health and Wellness Promotion, the staffing of HWP 152-155 has become a significant burden on the department, which has increasingly relied on lecturers and adjuncts to deliver these courses. The delivery of these courses uses the equivalent of nearly four faculty lines, even with increasing class sizes to 30 in recent semesters. During the summer, members of the CRTF met with the Chair of the Department of Health and Wellness, and he indicated that while the department would prefer to retain the requirement, they would accept this recommendation and that its members would continue to work, along with the North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness, to promote health and wellness throughout the curriculum.

Cluster requirement:

The CRTF proposes that the cluster requirement be eliminated. There is remarkable consistency in surveys of perceptions about clusters over the last several years, conducted with both faculty members and students. (In a survey of graduating seniors conducted in Spring 2011, 62.5% of students said that clusters should either probably or definitely not be required, while only 27.6% said that they should either probably or definitely be required.) Both students and faculty members frequently do not understand the purpose

of the topical cluster, nor do they, generally, believe that the courses taken to fulfill the topical cluster requirement are connected to each other or well-integrated. In addition, there are numerous concerns about the amount of faculty time that is devoted to application and review of courses for intensive and cluster designation as well as to the collaboration that is necessary to make clusters work as intended. While there are a few clusters that are highly successful at integrating knowledge across disciplines, that success is not uniform across clusters.

While faculty and student alike appreciate the concept of topical clusters, there are great concerns about their implementation and our ability to achieve the outcomes that were intended. We agreed that general education requirements should be reduced for reasons of sustainability and student flexibility. It is apparent to us that the topical cluster requirement is the easiest component to justify removing. We encourage the development of optional interdisciplinary minors to build on the successful interdisciplinary collaboration engendered by some of the ILS Topical Clusters.

Intensive requirements:

There was never any proposal or intent to eliminate intensives. Rather, following conversations that originated in the summer group, CRTF contemplated *methods* by which we can deliver intensives without the organizational or bureaucratic superstructure.

In its current form, intensives require faculty committees whose task it is to renew existing and to approve new intensives courses. Therefore, the question was not why and how should we eliminate intensives, but how can we keep them without the committee work that accompanies it. The summer committee first came up with the proposal to *fold* intensives into already existing department requirements (designated courses or experiences). This idea was itself the result of data analysis that showed that there has been considerable success in integrating and internalizing intensives into our curriculum. Another reason for folding intensives more intentionally into the majors was the very (real or perceived) division between ILS and majors. Hence, folding ILS into the majors and vice versa, intensifying or diversifying our majors had several potentially very favorable consequences.

These proposals were taken up by the full CRTF and in its fall 2012 conversations, faculty on the CRTF refined and reworded them. There was strong support from the full CRTF to retain information and writing intensives, but as major requirements (27 in favor, 1 abstention). However, based on campus feedback, as well as the views of many on the CRTF, we will retain the requirement that students complete a DI designated course, approved by a campus-wide faculty oversight committee. The faculty believe that our commitment to diversity justifies the retention of this requirement, perhaps with some reform to the criteria and oversight of DI courses.

LS 179 and 379:

There is a great difference in the perceived value of the introductory colloquium between new freshmen and transfer students. In the Spring 2011 survey of graduating seniors, asking students their views about whether or not components of ILS should be required,

on a scale of 1 to 5, new first-year students rated the introductory colloquium at 3.9 (LS 179), while transfer students rated it at 2.6 (LS 379). This stark difference confirms the perception of faculty that 179 is more important for new college students than is 379 for transfer students. The introductory colloquium is viewed as valuable by our four-year students, but not by transfers. Further, retention data clearly shows that 179 has had a demonstrable impact on the success of our first-year students. For this reason, we recommend the continuation of LS 179 in some form, but the removal of the introductory colloquium requirement for students transferring to UNC Asheville with 25 credit hours or more. While we left the structure of 179 open, perhaps leaving it exactly as it is, we believe that it has served an important purpose for our students.

Additional considerations:

Depending on one's reading of the results, the section "proposals without full consensus" contain areas of our curriculum about which CRTF is divided – or not as united as it is with regards to other elements listed above that heading. As it currently stands, CRTF is still divided (by a 20-9 vote, with 3 abstentions) over the desired number of Humanities courses. Currently at 4 courses, totaling 16 credits including the capstone 414/479, there is a proposal to reduce the offerings to 3 courses, totaling 12 hours (again, that includes 414/479). While certainly not the only element of our ILS, given its size within ILS, a lot of discussion – though by no means all of it - around reducing the size of ILS focused on the Humanities.

A second reform item over which CRTF is a bit more divided is the second Natural Science requirement (24 in favor, 6 opposed, with 1 abstention). A frequently expressed concern was whether, in light of a general population that is often regarded as insufficiently educated about the natural sciences, our University has a responsibility to improve that deficit. The committee acknowledged scientific literacy is taught in courses that are not designated as Natural Science courses and recommends broadening the list of courses to include a number of courses addressing scientific literacy. While all CRTF members agreed on the importance of educating our citizens about Natural Science, there was concern among CRTF members that adding a second Natural Science requirement – more broadly defined – would once again increase the total size of our general education component.

Conclusion

The current proposal is the result of a long deliberative process. While disagreements over specific aspects of the proposal remain, the CRTF agrees that, in its entirety, it is a proposal that constitutes an improvement over our current curriculum. Therefore, the CRTF recommends to faculty and the campus community that it be approved.